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KAL Conspiracy Theorists Distort Facts, Experts Say

By MICHAEL WINES and SAM JAMESON, *Times Staff Writers*

WASHINGTON—Two years after a Soviet fighter downed a Korean Air Lines jumbo jet in Soviet airspace and plunged 269 people to their deaths in the Sea of Japan, a handful of skeptics claim to have unearthed tantalizing new evidence that the airliner's fatal course, far from accidental meandering, had a far more sinister purpose—spying.

Their startling assertions, outlined in articles and letters, include Japanese radar data suggesting that the jet misled Tokyo air controllers about its altitude and course, as well as maps portraying KAL Flight 007 as veering over Soviet East Asian military bases.

There is even a recording of an American controller supposedly saying, "We should warn them," seconds after the doomed jet left U.S. airspace near Alaska.

It is damning stuff indeed, except for one problem: On closer scrutiny, U.S. officials and other experts say, none of it appears to be true. The revelations that are not false on their face are distortions of innocuous facts, they argue.

"It's a great story," said Thomas R. Maertens, a former State Department intelligence analyst now with the department's Soviet affairs office. "But it doesn't hold together."

"Once you get into the technicalities of it, the conspiracy theories fade away," agrees Murray Sayle, a Tokyo-based journalist and former Newsweek magazine reporter who has studied the KAL disaster almost since it occurred Sept. 1, 1983. "Where's their evidence?" he said.

Yet, troubles with the facts have not prevented spy buffs and dedicated researchers alike from elevating the KAL 007 disaster to a stellar level—a level once reserved for the likes of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Rosenberg spy trial of the early 1950s and the Lindbergh kidnaping.

Although congressional intelligence experts have derisively rejected any hint of a secret U.S. link to the tragedy, a House transportation subcommittee this fall began collecting data on the disaster after accusatory articles in The Nation magazine and reports by New York Times columnist Tom Wicker expressing skepticism about official accounts.

In Japan, backbench legislators and grieving families of crash victims still hope to pry loose government secrets they believe will prove that the South Korean jet was spying for the United States. In Korea, where the topic remains unofficially taboo, many citizens cite a "general belief" that the downed jet deliberately flew over the Soviet Union to save fuel.

But nothing has emerged to shake the conclusion of major aviation bodies, including the U.S. Air Line Pilots Assn. and the International Civil Aviation Organization, that the KAL disaster probably stemmed from pilot error, mechanical failure or both. The explanation is bolstered by sobering data that show that pilots in general stray from their assigned flight paths more often than has been assumed.

Still, no one has yet offered an ironclad explanation of how an error could have carried the Korean jet on the exact course that it took over the Soviet Union's militarily sensitive Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island. The only sources of the most definitive answers to that question—the "black boxes" that recorded KAL 007's flight path and cabin conversations—lie under water in the Sea of Japan.

The refusal of U.S., Japanese and Korean officials to release more of their own files on the downing—and their occasional denials that more exist—only deepen the suspicions of conspiracy advocates.

"The government apparently has a very, very strong interest in keeping this case closed," said David Pearson, a Yale University sociology student who has written two often-quoted articles on the shooting for The Nation magazine and who now plans a book.

Pearson and John Keppel, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer who is also investigating the KAL affair, are the leading American skeptics. Last month, they concluded in The Nation that the airliner "could not have accidentally or unknowingly flown its dangerous course" over the Soviet Union and that the Reagan Administration probably "has covered up vital evidence about the downing."

Normal Reports

Korean Air Lines Flight 007 left Anchorage, Alaska, on a nonstop flight to Seoul at 3 a.m. (local time) and was shot down by one or two Soviet air-to-air missiles 5 hours, 26 minutes later as it left Soviet airspace over Sakhalin Island.

Between the jet's takeoff and its 12-minute spiral into the Sea of Japan, the 747's three-man cockpit crew reported a normal flight to ground controllers, radioing their position as they passed computer-set "way points" along their North Pacific route and receiving permission to ascend from 33,000 to 35,000 feet only minutes before being shot down.

Despite the routine reports, the jet actually had strayed from its assigned path only 10 minutes after takeoff and was more than 300 miles off course by the time it was shot down—so far that it sometimes was out of radio range and had to relay its position reports to the ground via a second KAL jet flying nearby.

All experts agree that an alert crew should have discovered such a Gargantuan misstep, either through ordinary double-checking of data in flight or by sighting unexpected land masses on the jet's weather radar. The International Civil Aviation Organization concluded in its analysis of the disaster that the sort of inattention required to fly in the wrong direction for more than five hours is rare, "but not to a degree unknown in civil aviation."

One Senate staff expert, who was briefed by the CIA in September, 1984, after the first round of accusations surfaced that Flight 007 was on a spying mission, said he has "zero reason to believe that the Korean Air Lines tragedy was the result of anything but a terrible pilot error."

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Deliberate Intent Charged

Not everyone is so easily convinced. Pearson and Keppel, relying mostly on new Japan Defense Agency data and disclosures in lawsuits, now charge that Flight 007 deliberately flew into Soviet airspace, lied about its course to Japanese civil aviation officials and tried to elude Soviet fighters that chased it across Sakhalin Island.

"The official U.S. government and ICAO explanations of the tragedy—that KAL 007 innocently flew over Soviet territory as a result of some navigational error—are not credible," they wrote in the September article in The Nation.

The accusations have roused the most intense American interest in the KAL downing since 1983.

But as Sayle, Maertens and other debunkers note, the case for the most dramatic charges is something less than airtight:

—Pearson and Keppel contend that Japanese radar data and early, ignored reconstructions of the airliner's flight path prove that the KAL jet did not fly a straight line over Sakhalin—as it would have were the plane guided by automatic pilot—but instead flew "a broad arc, a turn of about 20 degrees in total, which the plane's crew could not have flown unknowingly."

Actually, Maertens said, the early, curving flight map cited in these investigations is, in fact, a straight line drawn on a satellite photograph of the round Earth, making the path itself appear to arc.

Soviet pilots chasing the KAL jet across Sakhalin radioed ground controllers at 3:09 a.m., 17 minutes before the plane was shot down, that the jet "has turned. . . . The target is 80 (degrees) to my left." But the Soviet pilot apparently erred; it was he who had executed a 20-degree turn less than a minute before he noted the change in the KAL plane's position, his radio transmissions indicated.

Constant Heading

All other references to the KAL jet's position, both before the Soviet pilot's turn and after he resumed his previous course, indicate that it was on a constant heading. Of the official reports on the incident, only the Soviet Union claims to have radar tracings that have the KAL jet wandering in looping curves across Sakhalin.

—Japanese radar data show that Flight 007 dived to 29,000 feet "almost precisely (at) the moment" it entered Sakhalin airspace, Pearson and Keppel wrote last month, although the jet told Tokyo air-traffic officials it was flying at 33,000 feet. When a Soviet jet fired cannon rounds at the airliner some nine minutes later, the data show, the plane rose again to 32,000 feet, even though the crew told Tokyo in a "calm-voiced" report at that moment that the jet was proceeding to 35,000 feet.

Pearson and Keppel may be reading more into the radar data than is there. The U.S. Naval Research Laboratory's Radar Handbook, the standard reference for radar accuracy, says that radar-based altitude estimates can err by a range of 4,000 to more than 14,700 feet when measured from radar stations 160 to 270 nautical miles away, the distance at which three Japanese radar stations picked up the KAL jet.

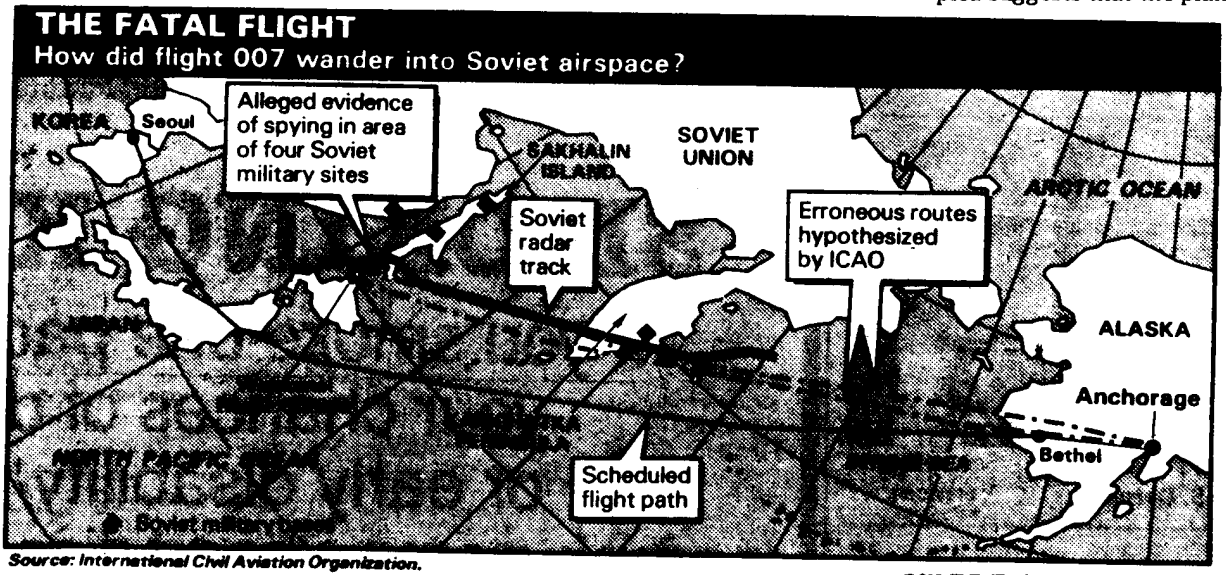
None of the recorded radio conversations by the Korean pilots or their Soviet pursuers hint that the jet dived to escape detection.

Also, even if the Japan Defense Agency data were accurate, it would not show that the jumbo jet dived or rose at "precisely" any moment, as the two investigators contend. The radar readings are like snapshots taken minutes apart and do not record when a plane changes position.

—In addition, Keppel and Pearson argue, "in the final moments before the fatal missile was fired, the (Japanese military) data suggest, the pilot of KAL 007 once again increased speed." To the two researchers, the burst of speed, coupled with the height variation, indicate not only deception but "evasive action" in the face of Soviet pursuit.

But Maertens says that the airliner's final, suspicious burst of evasive speed was an increase of roughly 20 knots, or 23 m.p.h., to about 540 m.p.h.—well below the sound barrier. By contrast, the Soviet SU-15 jet pursuing the 747 was capable of flying 2.3 times the speed of sound and was forced at one point during its pursuit to slow down because it had overrun the KAL plane.

—Tapes of conversations at the Anchorage Air Route Traffic Control Center, Keppel argues, show "beyond question" that someone said the words "warn him" or "warn them" as KAL 007 reached its first computer checkpoint off the Alaskan coast—out of civilian radar range but within range of offshore military radar. Keppel wonders whether the unheeded plea suggests that the plane's crew



Source: International Civil Aviation Organization.

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was knowingly sent to its fate by American officials.

The U.S. government acknowledges no such warning. In court documents filed last month, FBI acoustics expert Bruce Koenig says the Anchorage recording was filtered on the bureau's most sophisticated audio devices and does not contain the intelligible words "warn him" or "warn them."

—San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli says that widows of Flight 007's captain and co-pilot told him and others in a Seoul hotel early this year that their husbands were paid to fly over Soviet territory. "The two widows said (their husbands) brought the money home in cash," Belli recounted in an interview.

Attorney Charles Herrmann, who with Belli has represented 83 Koreans including survivors of the 29 KAL crew members aboard the doomed plane, also attended the meeting and said his memory of it is similar to Belli's. "But I personally do not believe that the substance of what the widows told us is the explanation for the incursion into Soviet territory." Nor, he said, does he believe that the plane was on a spying mission.

A third witness to at least some of Belli's and Herrmann's meetings, Korean legislator and human rights activist Park Han Sang, said he recalls no instances in which the crew members' survivors talked about deliberate flights over the Soviet Union, although he added that he was often busy during interviews and could have missed key conversations.

Extensive efforts by The Times to contact surviving family members of the KAL crew in South Korea were unsuccessful.

The critics of the conspiracy theorists have their own pet theories of why Flight 007 accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace.

International Civil Aviation Organization researchers last year identified two plausible pilot mistakes that could have led the plane to its fatal end.

One scenario speculates that the crew misprogrammed one of its three computer navigation systems, putting it off by 10 degrees—a mistake that would require but one wrong keystroke of the hundreds needed to set a computer course.

A second possibility is that the crew mistakenly left the plane on a straight magnetic heading of 246 degrees—the course needed to reach the first checkpoint in Bethel, Alaska—instead of switching to the computer inertial navigation system after takeoff.

Sayle, who prefers the 246-degree theory, notes that the navigation beacon at Anchorage airport by which pilots set their initial courses was not working the morning of the KAL flight, meaning that the plane flew "direct Bethel" on a magnetic heading rather than navigating by its computer inertial guidance system.

Also, service records at Anchorage indicate, a key system that would have warned the KAL pilots that they were flying on a magnetic heading, and not according to the computer course, was at least partly malfunctioning that morning.

"It's not that unusual an occurrence to have a wandered start for some reason, either equipment failure or a human mistake," said John O'Brien, the top safety official at the Air Line Pilots Assn. in Washington.

South Pacific Incident

Last fall, a South Pacific Island Airways jetliner from Anchorage to Amsterdam strayed several hundred miles off course and was stopped from entering Soviet airspace only when Norwegian F-16s were scrambled to intercept it. In 1978, another KAL jet accidentally flew over the western Soviet Union and was peppered with cannon fire, killing two people.

But no such evidence is likely to convince those who continue to ask why Flight 007's pilots failed to double-check their course, turn on their radar or perform any of a long list of routine checks that might have warned them of a problem.

"Along with the tragedy of the thing, its a terrific detective story," said Alexander Dallin, a Stanford University expert in Soviet affairs. "That's the charm of the thing. There are always a few pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that don't fit."

Michael Wines reported from Washington and Sam Jameson, from Japan and South Korea.